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ABSTRACT

In comparing the written and oral English syntax of Mexican-American bilingual and Anglo-American monolingual students, this study sought to learn specifically whether these two groups of students represent the same speech population in English syntactic use. A total of 70 subjects were randomly selected for the four groups (bilingual and monolingual fourth and ninth graders). Each subject was taped in an interview to acquire a sample of oral language production--free speech--while free writings in class were used for written production. Oral and written samples were divided into T-units, and 20 T-units of each language production were randomly sampled for each student and then analyzed to test for central tendency, dispersion, and skewness. Results showed that the bilingual and monolingual students do represent the same language population in English syntactic usages, except in ninth-grade written average clause length. However, the study raises questions, and the subject warrant's further research. (JM)

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A Comparison of the Written and Oral English Syntax of Mexican American Bilingual and Anglo American Monolingual Fourth and Ninth Grade Students (Las Vegas, New Mexico)

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CS 202 248

Among the many current dictums of education in the United States is one which states that if teachers are to successfully work with the language (or languages) of their students, the teachers must be aware of the dialects which those students bring to the classroom. Failure to consider the implications of different dialects may result in diminished student learnings and increased school failures.

In New Mexico, for instance, the effects of school curricula based solely upon the culture and language of the dominant middle-class English-speaking Anglo American society are apparent. Mexican American, or Spanish-surnamed, individuals comprise almost 40 percent of the population of New Mexico. The U. S. Commission on Civil Rights reported (1971, p. 31) that 58 percent of the Mexican American student population in New Mexico was reading below grade level in the eighth grade. New Mexico State Department of Education statistics (1973, pp. 17-34) reveal that the Mexican American student is behind the Anglo American student in measured test results and that the Mexican American student is farther behind in the eighth grade than he is in the fifth grade.

One might quite easily argue that standardized tests are culturally and, therefore, linguistically biased and are, as a result, invalid as a means of determining a student's knowledge or potential for success. Nevertheless, because such tests appear to measure a student's ability to succeed in a hypothetical school environment where English is the classroom language, a major question is whether the bilingual student who speaks both English and Spanish is at a disadvantage when compared with the monolingual student who speaks only English. One approach to answering such a question is to compare the English syntax of the bilingual Spanish-speaking student with the English syntax of the monolingual English-speaking student.

The primary purpose of the study which this paper reports was to describe the oral and written syntax of samples of English obtained from Mexican American bilingual and Anglo American monolingual fourth and ninth grade students of Las Vegas, New Mexico, a community of approximately 15,000 population. The students who attend the schools of the Las Vegas City School District live on ranches, in small outlying communities, and in Las Vegas itself. Approximately 75 percent of them are Spanish-surnamed. As numerous researchers have noted (e.g., Spolsky, 1970), assuming a one-to-one correlation between surname and language or cultural characteristics is fallacious. The surname data are included here to add to the description of the geographical community. In fact, the study determined that only 35 percent of the student population considered

Spanish to be their first language.

The English syntax that is studied here is that which is employed in a school setting. As Fishman (1968) demonstrated, a bilingual community is not one in which the members employ either language equally in all settings. A person's speech production varies according to the context in which it is used. Thus, since teachers work with students within the confines of the school and since the English spoken by those students in school is that which they would normally employ in a school setting, the domain for this study is the school itself.

Most of the fourth grade students in the Las Vegas City School District have completed three years of bilingual education. Only one of the five elementary schools does not have bilingual education at this date. The ninth grade students have not had bilingual education other than in a Spanish language course in the middle school. It is possible that bilingual education may have influenced the results of this study. The reasons may become clear later.

A few basic considerations ought to be mentioned here. The study is patterned upon those of Hunt (1964), O'Donnell (1967), and Pope (1969). Hunt developed a specific syntactic unit, the T-unit or minimal terminable unit, as a basic measurement of syntactic maturity. The T-unit consists of one main clause and all subordinations which may be attached to it. It has proven to be a much more specifically identifiable unit than the sentence or clause, the definitions of which tend to be quite arbitrary.

Although the study employs a transformational-generative grammar for its analysis, that is not to imply that such a grammar should be the basis for teaching English to speakers of other dialects. In addition, the study is specifically limited to Las Vegas, New Mexico. By extension, one might assume similarities with other communities in northern New Mexico, but by no means should one consider the findings to be applicable to other speech communities throughout the United States with large Spanish-speaking populations. For instance, of the 220 ninth grade students surveyed prior to this study, only one was born in Mexico. The subjects in this study all speak English, as do all the school children in Las Vegas. With the possible exception of very recent immigrants, not one could be considered a speaker of Spanish alone.

Furthermore, one should not consider this or any description of syntax as an indication that syntax exists in isolation from other factors. The syntax correlates with semantic and phonological variations which are not part of this study and, perhaps even more importantly, with sociological factors. But knowledge gained from studies such as this can be a basis for curricular decisions and for developing a rationale for such decisions.

The central question asked by this study was whether or not the Mexican American bilingual and Anglo American monolingual students represent the same speech population in English syntactic use.

No attempt was made to divide the students by socioeconomic level or measured test results, such as I.Q. scores. Bilingual students were determined by self-assessment and bilingual teacher evaluation.

Four groups were selected for study: (1) Mexican American bilingual fourth grade, (2) Anglo American monolingual fourth grade, (3) Mexican American bilingual ninth grade, and (4) Anglo American monolingual ninth grade, a total of 70 subjects. The subjects were randomly selected from the total population for each group. Each subject was taped in an interview to acquire a sample of his oral language production, his free speech; and his free writings in class were used for his written production. Both the oral and written samples were divided into T-units. Twenty T-units of each language production were randomly sampled for each student and then analyzed. The data were subjected to the Kolmogorov-Smirnov two-sample test to test for central tendency, dispersion, and skewness (Siegel, 1956).

The hypotheses which directly compare the bilingual and monolingual groups are reported here. The first set of hypotheses specified that the Mexican American bilingual and Anglo American monolingual students in the fourth and ninth grades represent the same population in terms of average number of words per clause, average number of clauses per T-unit, and average number of words per T-unit in both the oral and written

modes. Only one significant difference was determined. In the written mode, ninth grade bilingual students had significantly fewer average words per clause than ninth grade monolingual students.

The second set of hypotheses specified that the Mexican American bilingual and Anglo American monolingual students in the fourth and ninth grades represent the same population in terms of the total number of "sentence-embedding" transformations in headed nominal, non-headed nominal, adverbial, and coordinated structures. There was no significant difference between the bilingual and monolingual groups on any of these measures.

The third set of hypotheses specified that Mexican American bilingual and Anglo American monolingual students in the fourth and ninth grades represent the same population in terms of the number (per 100 words) of syntactic and morphological rule variations from "standard" English. No significant difference in either the total syntactic rule variations or total morphological rule variations was found between the groups. The greatest group of morphological errors occurred in the monolingual omission of the -ly adverb marker. Very few bilinguals omitted the -ly adverb marker.

As was predicted, all syntactic maturity measures increased in quantity from fourth to ninth grade. The next set of hypotheses specified that there would be no difference in

the amount of increase of those measures between the bilingual and monolingual groups. The monolinguals increased the arithmetical amounts of the three measures--average length of clauses, average number of clauses per T-unit, and average length of T-units--more than the bilinguals did. But no attempt was made to determine whether the differences between groups were significant since the histories of the fourth and ninth grade groups are not comparable. A longitudinal study would be most helpful here.

Generally, one can conclude that the bilingual and monolingual students, with the exception of ninth grade written average clause length, do represent the same language population in their English syntactic usages. And, if this is the case, the syntax productions do not explain why the bilingual subjects in the ninth grade show an average of three years reading retardment compared to the ninth grade monolingual subjects. The study indicates that, compared to student groups in other sectors of the United States, both bilingual and monolingual ninth graders have lower syntactic maturity measures in Las Vegas, whereas this is not the case with the fourth graders. Therefore, bilingualism cannot be shown to be a direct factor.

The fact that there is no significant difference in the distributions of syntactic and morphological rule variations indicates that basing curricula upon the concepts of contrastive analysis may be invalid. Most of the bilinguals in this study grew up speaking both English and Spanish.

To explain standardized test results, we ought to look at cultural, social, and experiential factors to explain low scores of bilinguals. We might discover that teachers who expect poor syntactic productions from bilinguals may be basing their pedagogical techniques upon faulty premises and therefore not facing the true reasons for linguistic differences between bilingual and monolingual students. Perhaps it is such expectations which contribute to the retardment of bilingual students on standardized tests.

As is often the case, this study raises more questions than it answers. Does bilingual education prevent linguistic retardment? A longitudinal study of the same subjects is needed to answer this, assuming that bilingual education continues throughout the school years with the students. What is the relationship of vocabulary and syntax? Indeed, can semantic usages be separated from syntactic usages? And, is it possible to develop flexibility and frequencies of syntactic patterns before societal changes occur?

All United States teachers are teachers of English to speakers of other dialects, whatever those teachers' formal functions may be. Whether they are involved in a bilingual education program or whether they are monolinguals teaching the most tradition-based English courses, they must be prepared to work with the child's language as he brings it to the classroom, not as they prejudge it to be or not to be. Ultimately,

the teacher is the one who must determine what linguistic variations the child brings with him to the classroom and to use, not abuse, those variations.

Although this study was not intended to tell teachers how to teach their students, hopefully it does show that bilingual students in Las Vegas, and perhaps northern New Mexico and elsewhere in the United States, are in no way linguistically deprived in their use of syntax as determined by this study. Despite these findings, standardized measures still indicate retardment in language skills of bilinguals. Even if we grant that standardized tests are invalid because of linguistic and cultural biases, what they do measure is the child's ability to succeed in schools as they exist now. Even if we throw out all standardized measures, we still will not help the child until we begin to base our curricula upon more accurate knowledge of that child's language and that great envelope into which language fits, his culture.

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